

# **“Subjective Historiography in E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*”**

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## Summary

- How does *Ragtime* resemble, and diverge from, a traditional historiographic text, and what is the purpose of Doctorow's parodic reworking of historiography?

As an introduction to this thesis, the debate in different literary traditions regarding the relationship between literature and historiography is presented. With a primary focus on postmodern theory, Linda Hutcheon's concept "historiographic metafiction" is introduced, in order to establish the type of narrative that *Ragtime* is. E. L. Doctorow's essay "False Documents" is discussed in a separate part of this chapter because it provides a deeper understanding of the philosophical ideas behind Doctorow's narrative. In this text he fights for the importance of the fiction writer as commentator on our society, and challenges the notion that the genre of historiography is a purveyor of objective truths as opposed to literature which, according to Doctorow, is generally considered unimportant or "merely for fun". Doctorow claims that "all is narrative", implying that fiction and non-fiction are equal as they can only provide subjective accounts of the past.

The subjectivity inherent in historiographic narratives is further explored through Doctorow's presentation of historical characters in *Ragtime*. The presence of celebrity characters creates confusion about the nature of the novel as a work of fiction or as a historiographic account. Through the use of irony and humour, *Ragtime* is a parody of historiographic narratives which claim to be objective. Furthermore, the Little Boy narrates the story of his childhood from the historical point of the mid-1970s. As a consequence, the narration is a complex mix of his childhood memories, his imaginative abilities and the general discourse about the Ragtime years as it is presented through the media and historical intertexts. As an omniscient story-teller, he is able to relate to events that took place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which proved significant in the years to come. The narrative strategies of traditional historiographic narratives are exploited, yet the Little Boy's awareness of the instability of representation, creates a parodic relation to the genre of historiography.

Through *Ragtime* Doctorow proves his point that "all is narrative", as he reveals that all types of narratives are inescapably subjective. He argues for a collective kind of history-writing where there is no discrimination between genres. The result would be a complex library of a multitude of subjective historiographies.

## Preface

I first encountered E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* in a course called "Postmodernism in American Literature" which I attended in the autumn of 2007. The novel was very enjoyable to read and I particularly fell for Doctorow's humorous and satirical tone in his presentation of the social conditions in America at the turn of the twentieth century. What struck me the most however, in reading it on my own and discussing it in class, was the untraditional type of historical narrative that *Ragtime* is. Through a transparent claim to an objective point of view, at the same time as the portrayal of historical celebrities differs markedly from the accounts of the same persons' lives in traditional historiographic narratives, the novel seemed difficult to categorize as a work of mere fiction or as a work holding historiographic value. It became even more interesting when I was told that *Ragtime* had occasionally been used as a source in History-lessons in American schools after its publication. Therefore, I decided to make the conception of history that I found in *Ragtime* the case for my master's thesis with the working title "Subjective History in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*".

In the process of reading different sources on *Ragtime* and developing my own thesis, I discovered that the term "history" was often used indiscriminately in referring to both the actual events of the past, and the act of writing about the past. I found it necessary to distinguish between "history" and "historiography", since it is crucial to understand that historiography involves a representation of history, but is not history itself. Consequently, I changed the title of my thesis to fit this distinction. Thus, the terms applied by the sources I refer to and the terms used in my own discussion may not always correspond, but it should be clear what is meant from the context.

The first chapter of this thesis is an introductory chapter where I focus on the debate in different literary traditions regarding the relationship between literature and historiography. I look more closely at postmodern theory since I find this philosophy to resemble Doctorow's standpoint as it is communicated through *Ragtime* and his essay "False Documents". The latter text clearly expresses his view of the debate on the status of historiography and literature, which is central to my discussion in the following chapters, and

is therefore discussed in a separate part of Chapter 1. In Chapter 2 the presence of the actual historical persons in *Ragtime*, and the untraditional portrayals of these characters, is developed. The manner in which these celebrities are characterized by Doctorow differs markedly from the way that they have usually been presented in historiographic narratives, and is perhaps the most distinctive feature of his literary battle against the hegemony of historiography. Harry Houdini's character is examined more closely since it provides a good example of the strategies employed by Doctorow in his re-writing of the textual representations of the past. In Chapter 3 I explore the peculiar narrative style of the novel in order to establish the location of the narrator, and discuss how the style of his narrative resembles historiographic accounts and unveils the subjectivity that lies behind all narratives, historiographic as well as literary. Chapter 4 provides a conclusion to my thesis.

The question I will attempt to provide an answer to through this thesis is:

How does *Ragtime* resemble, and diverge from, a traditional historiographic text, and what is the purpose of Doctorow's parodic reworking of historiography?

In the process of writing my thesis I have received valuable help and support:

I would like to thank Erik Kielland-Lund who has been my supervisor. Thank you for all the help you have given me in the process of writing this text as well as for your support and interest in my project! I also want to thank you for teaching the very enjoyable course "Postmodernism in American Fiction" which introduced me to Doctorow's *Ragtime* and inspired my fascination with the novel. Furthermore, I would like to thank my fellow students for all the good discussions in the cantina over numerous cups of coffee. I wish you all the best of luck for the future! I would like to thank my mother for always being supportive and my father for your interesting insights and encouraging spirit when reading the text. I am very grateful to my mother in law who has watched my son once a week for several months, and Stine, Morten and Ann-Marit, and my mother and father who have also babysit on several occasions, which has made it possible for me to finish writing this text. Last, but definitely not least, I would like to thank my wonderful husband who has read my thesis and provided me with interesting ideas along the way, in addition to encouraging and supporting me. I love you!

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## CHAPTER 1

### Historiography and Literature—Simply a Matter of Fact and Fiction?

E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, published in July 1975, became an immediate success with the readers. In the year of its publication a total of 232,340 copies of the book were sold and it remained at the top of the *Publishers Weekly* list for 15 weeks and the *New York Times Book Review List* for 13.<sup>1</sup> While the initial reviews were largely positive, the novel also received some negative criticism, mostly due to Doctorow's mix of historical facts and persons and fictional events and characters. Some critics found his novel anachronistic, especially with regard to Coalhouse Walker's rebellion, and many questioned the historical novel's fidelity to facts. Yet, the novel also opened up for a more general debate about the relationship between the genres of historiography and literature.<sup>2</sup> Is it simply a matter of fact and fiction?

In his work *The Poetics*, Aristotle says that historiography narrates "the thing that has been", while poets are concerned with "the kind of thing that might be." Aristotle finds poetry a better way of knowing, as it is "more concerned with the universal, and history more with the individual". The universality of poetics refers to general human nature, while the individuality of historiography is concerned with the specific events in time.<sup>3</sup> Throughout literary history, there has been a recurring discussion regarding the relationship between historiography and literature. It has been of importance for the literary discourse to defend the arts against the criticism of it as being immoral or irrelevant.<sup>4</sup> For the modernists, literature was seen as surpassing historiography as a way of knowing, and writers of this era often employed a timeless, mythic structure to their work. Some critics in the modernist era, such as Lionel Trilling, found literature valuable as a means to "capture the complexity of human

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<sup>1</sup> Piehl, Kathy. "E.L. Doctorow and Random House: The Ragtime Rhythm of Cash" in *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. XIII, Issue 3, 2004:406-407

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/119586311/PDFSTART>

<sup>2</sup> Williams, John. *Fiction as False Document-- The Reception of E.L. Doctorow in the Postmodern Age*, Columbia: Camden House Inc., 1996:37

<sup>3</sup> Williams, 1996:38

<sup>4</sup>Williams, 1996:38

beings in particular cultures at specific historic points,” and these critics created a school of cultural criticism called American Studies in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> The focus on the importance of culture in literary criticism was once again established in the 1980s with the development of a New Historicist tradition. Literature is situated within the institutions of its time and is regarded as both “a product and a producer of cultural energies.”<sup>6</sup> Literature and history are generally considered to be equal, since they are formed under the same historical conditions and express the cultural realities of the time when a text is written.<sup>7</sup>

When science emerged as the dominant mode of knowledge, it became important for literary scholars to defend literary criticism as a legitimate scholarly discipline. The critical tradition of New Criticism emerged in the 1940s as a response to this need and provided a semi-scientific model for understanding literature with precise analytical tools and close reading. The New Critics, who came to dominate the critical landscape in the postwar period, saw poetry as a “verbal icon” which was separate from the genre of historiography.<sup>8</sup>

The conception of literature and historiography as separate took a back seat from the 1960s onwards, as poststructuralism and postmodernism erased the idea of separate genres, claiming that “history is no less interpretative than literature”.<sup>9</sup> In her essay “Historiographic Metafiction—Parody and the Intertextuality of History”, Linda Hutcheon argues that what characterizes postmodern literature is that it usually involves intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality in addition to an equally self-conscious conception of history. She invents the term “historiographic metafiction” in order to distinguish this type of literature from traditional historiographic fiction:<sup>10</sup> “The term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, 1996:39

<sup>6</sup> Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle, 1999:183

<sup>7</sup> Williams, 1996:40

<sup>8</sup> Williams, 1996:39

<sup>9</sup> Williams, 1996:40

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. “Historiographic Metafiction—Parody and the Intertextuality of History” in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. O'Donnell, P., and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989:3

*and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past.”<sup>11</sup> The conception that fiction and even non-fiction can represent reality is discarded in postmodern philosophy, yet historiographic literature still aims to situate itself within the historical discourse through a parodic reworking of the textual pasts of historiography and literature.<sup>12</sup> As we can only know our past through textual representations of it, intertextuality is the very basis for historiographic fiction and even the entire discipline of historiography.<sup>13</sup> The nature of postmodern fiction is paradoxical, as it at the same time employs and rejects historiographic texts as representations of “the world”:

(...) the “world” in which the text situates itself is the “world” of discourse, the “world” of texts and intertexts. This “world” has direct links to the world of empirical reality, but it is not itself that empirical reality. It is a contemporary critical truism that realism is really a set of conventions, that the representation of the real is not the same as the real itself. What historiographic metafiction challenges is both any naïve realist concept of representation and any equally naïve textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world.<sup>14</sup>

In the postmodern tradition, historiography loses much of its privileged power as purveyor of truth, and is rather seen as narrativization of the past. Still, the value of history-writing is not denied but the conditions of veracity are redefined.<sup>15</sup> This philosophical standpoint is at the heart of E.L. Doctorow’s discussion in his essay “False documents,” which I will examine further below.

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<sup>11</sup> Hutcheon, 1989:3

<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon, 1989:4

<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon, 1989:4

<sup>14</sup> Hutcheon, 1989:6

<sup>15</sup> Hutcheon, 1989:11



## False Documents

In 1977 Doctorow wrote the essay “False Documents” as an attempt to answer his critics and their skepticism towards his “confusion” of historical facts and fictional events in *Ragtime*. In the essay he locates two kinds of power in language. *The power of the regime* refers to sentences claiming objective factualness such as a newspaper article from *The New York Times* which is used as an example of this mode of thinking. At the heart of the industrial society in which we live is empiricism, and realism functions as a consensus of sensibility. Narration such as fictional literature has *the power of freedom* as it does not claim to be true and cannot be verified: “There is a regime of language that derives its strength from what we are supposed to be and a language of freedom whose power consists in what we threaten to become.”<sup>16</sup> Writers of fiction are able to exploit the possibilities of imagination since they do not need to limit their narratives to representations that are considered to be realistic.

Storytelling once had the power to guide and advise its listeners, but in our modern society readers do not find a presumption of truth in storytelling. Doctorow mentions two classic novels, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, both examples of novels where the author has felt the need to dissociate himself from his work, claiming that he cannot be regarded as the author, but should rather be seen as the editor of the text in order to gain an authority of truthfulness for their stories. This device is called a “false document”, a term borrowed from Kenneth Rexroth, and the story needs only to be possibly true to have effect. What is real and possibly real is mixed up, the boundaries between historiography and fiction are erased, and the result is a state where storytelling once again has the authority of giving counsel to the listeners.<sup>17</sup> Doctorow says in an early article from the New York Times:

My book is a false document. A true document would be the Gulf of Tonkin resolution or the Watergate tapes. The basic false documents are dreams, which repeat things that didn’t take place—and prophecy our lives.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Doctorow, E. L. “False Documents” in *Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner, New Jersey: Ontario Review Inc., 1983:17

<sup>17</sup> Doctorow, 1983:20-21

<sup>18</sup> Gussow, Mel. “Novelist Syncopates History in *Ragtime*” in *The New York Times*, July 11<sup>th</sup> 1975

False documents generally mean fictional texts which try to make the reader believe for a moment that what is written is true. Writers of fiction may feel the need to use this strategy in order to gain a sense of authenticity for their texts, and overcome the limited authority that fiction is awarded in our society.

In the industrially advanced countries of the world, writers do not hold the same importance in voicing political concerns and expressing the voices of the people as they do in less industrially advanced parts of the world. Here, literature is politics. Writers may be regarded as dangerous enemies if they are in opposition to those in power, and there are a number of imprisoned writers around the world. In America, writers are rather controlled by the apprehension that novels are only for fun and limited to the area of esthetics:

The novelist need not be taken seriously because his work is a taste of young people, women, intellectuals, and other pampered minorities, and, lacking any real currency, is not part of the relevant business of the nation.<sup>19</sup>

Humorously, Doctorow reflects upon his own less than hospitable attitude towards nonfiction, as if he was regarding “a team from another city”. While nonfiction has gained an authority which fiction does not have, it is also limited by its necessity to appear objective and factual. Nietzsche claimed that “there are no facts in themselves. For a fact to exist we must first introduce meaning.”<sup>20</sup> In terms of historiography, Doctorow argues that “there is no history except as it is composed.”<sup>21</sup> Once experienced, the event must be communicated and will always involve a judgment of some kind. Creating historiography involves interpretation and selection of material. Doctorow quotes Historian Carl Becker who says: “The facts of history do not exist for any historian until he has created them.”<sup>22</sup> Doctorow claims that:

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file:///C:/Users/emil/Desktop/doctorow-syncopates.html

<sup>19</sup> Doctorow, 1983:22

<sup>20</sup> Doctorow, 1983:23

<sup>21</sup> Doctorow, 1983:24

<sup>22</sup> Doctorow, 1983:24

History is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory, by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes.<sup>23</sup>

Doctorow erases the distinction between historiography and literature by saying that “there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, he still elevates the role of the novelist as he says that a writer of fiction has the possibility of creating false documents which are more true and real than any work of nonfiction, since a novelist knows that the world is ever-changing and that “reality is amenable to any construction that is placed upon it.”<sup>25</sup> The writer of fiction admits that he lies and is therefore more honest than any writer of historiography who claims to tell the truth:

By our independence of all institutions, from the family to the government, and with no responsibility to defend them from their own hypocrisy and murderousness, we are a valuable resource and an instrument of survival.<sup>26</sup>

Doctorow’s skeptical view of historiographic truthfulness has been criticized by several scholars. Alfred Kazin briefly mentions *Ragtime* in his short article in the *New Republic* in 1975 called “Alfred Kazin on Fiction”, where he easily dismisses it as a sentimental, sure-fire product, a “historical confection.”<sup>27</sup> The headline of Richard Todd’s book review on *Ragtime* from 1976, “The Most-Overrated-Book-of-the-Year Award, and Other literary Prizes,” sums up his disappointment with the novel. He finds it shallow and argues that it is concerned with surface instead of depth and meaning. It is anti-nostalgic, yet “participates in all the simplifying gestures of nostalgia.” It seems to me that Todd misses the parodic qualities of the novel. He writes:

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<sup>23</sup> Doctorow, 1983:25

<sup>24</sup> Doctorow, 1983:26

<sup>25</sup> Doctorow, 1983:26

<sup>26</sup> Doctorow, 1983:27

<sup>27</sup> Kazin Alfred. “Alfred Kazin on Fiction.” *The New Republic*, Dec 6<sup>th</sup> 1975:18

There are Large Causes of course: we are all trapped in history, whose patterns are sad and nefarious—though they are also rather exhilarating and swell, since they exonerate us from small duties. This worldview says implicitly that there is no need to worry about private responsibilities, about our ability to wound and to heal each other—which is, of course, always nice to hear.<sup>28</sup>

He argues that the novel lacks motives and that the only lesson to learn from it is that “nothing connects.” Contrary to Todd’s view, I find that *Ragtime* presents the conception that we are not trapped in history, but rather in the domination of historiography. Todd favors a traditional historiographic novel which relies on realism as a sensibility, and in light of these expectations it is no wonder that he finds the mock historical-pedantic style of the novel disappointing. *Ragtime* is a metafictional novel which poses philosophical questions regarding the nature of fiction and non-fiction, in addition to being a parodic reworking of the historiographic presentations of the Ragtime years in America.

Barbara Foley finds postmodern writers’ attitude towards historical reality “apocalyptic”, as she argues that the focus is generally more on “the process of historical reconstruction itself, rather than what is being represented.”<sup>29</sup> Foley favors novelist John Dos Passos’ view of history as “knowable, coherent, significant, and inherently moving”.<sup>30</sup> *Ragtime* is not “a dense study of character”, but rather, as John G. Parks puts it, a challenge to the traditional notions of plot.<sup>31</sup> The reason why Doctorow is preoccupied with the process of historical reconstruction is because he wants to establish a sensibility in our society that all types of narrativization are inherently subjective, which opens up for a more honest and complex discourse about the past, where it is not only the voice of historiography that is regarded as important. While history itself may be considered knowable and coherent, the act of communicating the events of the past is always subjective. While it may seem that Doctorow’s sole preoccupation is with metafiction, *Ragtime* is, in the minds of most readers

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<sup>28</sup> Todd, Richard. “The Most-Overrated-Book-of-the-Year Award and Other Literary Prizes.” *Atlantic Monthly* 237, 1976:96

<sup>29</sup> Foley, Barbara. ”From *U.S.A* to *Ragtime*: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction” in *Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner , New Jersey: Ontario Review Inc., 1983:175

<sup>30</sup> Foley, 1983:171

<sup>31</sup> Parks, John G. *E.L. Doctorow*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1991:59

and literary critics, also a strong criticism of the injustice and hypocrisy of the American society from the Ragtime years to the time of the novel's publication.

Several critics have pointed to a contradiction in Doctorow essay: How can literature be seen as more truthful and honest than historiography at the same time as he erases the distinction between fiction and non-fiction and says that essentially there is only narrative? John Williams argues that this is a general problem for theorists who erase the idea of separate genres yet fight for the special importance of the fiction writer as commentator on our society.<sup>32</sup> Still, the awareness of a fiction writer who knows that what he is creating is merely a representation of reality, may lead to the production of a text which is more genuine in its conception of the world than any work of science that is produced through the claim of authenticity of non-fiction. In the words of New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt:

But those who love literature tend to find more intensity in simulations – in the formal, self-conscious miming of life – than in any of the other textual traces left by the dead, for simulations are undertaken in full awareness of the absence of the life they contrive to represent, and hence they may skillfully anticipate and compensate for the vanishing of the actual life that has empowered them.<sup>33</sup>

Doctorow honestly admits in his essay that it is in his interest as a novelist to claim the same importance for his fiction as the status which is awarded historiography.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, it seems that Doctorow through his writing longs to return to the years when fiction had more importance and was a means of giving advice to its readers, while on the other hand, the “mock historical-pedantic” style of *Ragtime* creates a strong sense of criticism of historical narratives which claim to be objective and unbiased.

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<sup>32</sup> Williams, 1996:92

<sup>33</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen. “The Circulation of Social Energy” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000:496

<sup>34</sup> Doctorow, 1983:26

## CHAPTER 2

### Historical Characters in *Ragtime*

*Ragtime* appears as an historical novel with its capturing of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century society mainly through Doctorow's extensive use of historical celebrities as characters in his novel. In one way, it seems that the purpose of this is to make *Ragtime* a "false document", a story which is possibly true because the reader encounters factual personages whom he is already familiar with and knows are actual historical figures. Yet, Doctorow's extensive use of irony and humor in his description of these characters, as well as the narrator's expression of their thoughts and feelings, run counter to the notion that the aim of the novel is to appear objective and historically truthful.

Georg Lukàcs' work *The Historical Novel* is often cited when critics of *Ragtime* try to define the historical novel: "What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events."<sup>35</sup> Contrary to the usual account of history through the use of a "consensus" of historical celebrities whom most of us are familiar with, Doctorow's "poetic awakening of people" focuses more on a selection of unknown characters from different social groups whose voices have rarely been heard in the traditional telling of history. While *Ragtime*'s historical characters are named, the fictional characters are simply identified by the social categories that they belong to, such as family roles or ethnic groups. This resembles the strategy that is often applied in historiographic narratives where a few individuals are magnified and awarded an extreme status, while the experiences of most common people are diminished and made into generalization about whole groups of people who have one salient feature in common, such as ethnicity or religion. The Anglo-American family consists of Mother, Father, the Little Boy, Grandfather and Mother's Younger Brother, the Jewish family is identified as Mameh, Tateh and the Little Girl, and the African-American family contains the black girl and the black child. Yet Coalhouse Walker Jr. is named, and he identifies the black girl as Sarah. Liz Maynes-Aminzade argues in her article "Rescuing the Past from History: E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*" that Doctorow uses Coalhouse Walker Jr.'s full

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<sup>35</sup> Lukàcs, Georg. *The Historical Novel*, Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969:44

name because he is a reinvention of Heinrich Von Kleist's hero "Michael Kohlhaas", the protagonist of a novel which was published in 1810 and set in the age of Martin Luther. The Jr. suffix may then work as a reference to the 1970s and Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>36</sup> Coalhouse Walker is probably the most influential character in *Ragtime*, and as most critics of Doctorow have pointed out, his story is not typical of the early 1900s: "Inheriting a history of neglect, abuse and exploitation, Coalhouse Walker embodies the claims of a new history upon America, especially upon the white middle class as represented by Mother and Father."<sup>37</sup> Through the interaction of the fictive families and historical characters, a number of tensions in the American society at the beginning of the twentieth century are confronted:

As a contemporary historical romance, the novel is a syncopation of a number of oppositions and tensions: degeneration and regeneration, static forms and volatile images, repetition and change, history and fantasy, self and other, rich and poor, white and black, WASP and immigrant, narcissism and self-divestment, journeys outward and journeys inward, departures and arrivals.<sup>38</sup>

The three families are, at the beginning of the novel, separated because of ethnic, religious and class differences, but through a series of occurrences and coincidences, they are brought together and become one family at the end of the novel. Mother, Tateh, who has transformed into Baron Ashkenazy, the Little Boy, the Little Girl and the black child represents a new multiethnic family structure, "a microcosm of the melting pot always promised but, as the novel argues, never achieved by that innocent America now forever lost."<sup>39</sup> *Ragtime* is a criticism of the injustice of the past, and consequently an invitation to a critical scrutiny of the social conditions in the present. Still, one might argue that rather than creating despair about past failures, Doctorow expresses that through a narrativization of the past there is always the possibility of learning from past mistakes and being more morally responsible in the future. Therefore, the significance of Doctorow's fictional characters as historical representations is

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<sup>36</sup> Maynes-Aminzade, Liz. "Rescuing the Past from History: E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*". *Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism* vol. IV, 2006:12, <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/english/cjlc/cjlc4.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Parks, 1991:65

<sup>38</sup> Parks, 1991:63

<sup>39</sup> Harter, Carol C., James R. Thompson. *E.L. Doctorow*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990:53

not limited to the novel's present, but is equally important to readers of *Ragtime* in the 1970s as well as for readers in 2009.

While the historical celebrities are not at the center of the novel, but rather emerge from time to time, their presence creates confusion about the novel's nature as a work of fiction or as a historiographic account of the past. Historically verifiable occurrences, such as Freud's travel to America and the deportation of Emma Goldman to Russia, are mixed with the invention of new events and the interaction of historical and fictional characters: "He does not just set his story in a particular historical frame for purposes of fictional decoration. Instead he puts history into his fiction, not changing the 'facts' of history, but rather imagining new 'facts'."<sup>40</sup> Harry Houdini crashes into the telephone pole outside the Anglo-American family's house in New Rochelle. Evelyn Nesbit falls in love with Tateh's Little Girl, is taken under radical socialist Emma Goldman's wing and has a brief love affair with Mother's Younger Brother. J. P. Morgan invites Henry Ford to his library to discuss their roles as reincarnated leaders of mankind. The celebrity characters become mythic characters rather than historical. As Harter and Thompson argue, historiography is denied an objective value, yet the communication of history is still awarded mythic significance.<sup>41</sup>

The celebrities do not only serve as characters, each one also represents a historical force from the Ragtime Era. Freud represents Psychoanalysis, Goldman Socialism, Morgan Capitalism, Ford industrial Fordism and Houdini mass entertainment.<sup>42</sup> The Ragtime era is an interesting point in time as it was a period of extreme transition. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham says: "(...) the era was never fully present to itself: it constantly produced effects it could neither control nor predict and so was always becoming known and unknown to itself."<sup>43</sup> The forces that the historical characters represent are forces that have had an enormous impact on the society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore these celebrities generally become symbols in historiographic accounts, rather than living, breathing individuals like the rest of us. They are magnified and awarded great fame in the minds of most people:

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<sup>40</sup> Parks, 1991:61

<sup>41</sup> Harter and Thompson, 1990:58

<sup>42</sup> Maynes-Aminzade, 2006:13

<sup>43</sup> Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "E.L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative". *PMLA*, Vol. 100, No. 1, January 1985:90



Those who are famous for their wealth, their beauty, their power to shape events, carry the symbolic freight of the American Dream; by virtue of their exalted status, they may be considered as mythological characters who ride the crest of history.<sup>44</sup>

Stephen Harris argues that “the public entrancement with such figures” reveals people’s willingness to submit to “a condition of hypnotism induced through the visual propaganda of illusion.”<sup>45</sup> A distorted view of history is produced as the relationship between all individuals and the shaping forces of history is denied.<sup>46</sup> Liz Maynes-Aminzade argues that Doctorow, with his use of historical celebrities, tries to challenge the “great men” style that has dominated historiographic accounts of the past.<sup>47</sup> None of these characters are portrayed as “great”, but are rather seen as regular people with faults and insecurities like everybody else: “We see these great men and women undergoing identity crises, dabbling amateurishly in hobbies, or turning desperately to mythology to make sense of their lives.”<sup>48</sup> Houdini, whose function in *Ragtime* will be examined later in this chapter, appears as a basically insecure person whose only real joy is the love he feels for his mother. Freud feels oppressed by America, and there is a humorous account in the novel of his desperate need to use a public facility which is nowhere to be found. Evelyn Nesbit is the victim of Harry K. Thaw’s sadistic abuse and grows obsessed with Tateh’s Little Girl. J.P. Morgan desperately tries to make sense of his life, and his spiritual struggle ends with a depressing visit to the Egyptian pyramids which leads to a decline in his health. The “flat” quality of these characters are typical of satire and produces caricatures rather than deep and complex characters.<sup>49</sup>

In creating historical figures whose inner life the reader has access to, Doctorow plays with the boundaries between “historical certainties” and fictional possibilities. Doctorow

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<sup>44</sup> Saltzman, Arthur. “The Stylistic Energy of E.L. Doctorow” in *Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner, New Jersey: Ontario Review Inc., 1983:92

<sup>45</sup> Harris, Stephen. *The Fiction of Gore Vidal and E. L. Doctorow—Writing the Historical Self*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2002:191

<sup>46</sup> Harris, 2002:191

<sup>47</sup> Maynes-Aminzade, 2006:11

<sup>48</sup> Maynes-Aminzade, 2006:11

<sup>49</sup> Harris, 2002:188

himself has said that he is no longer certain which character traits he has invented and which he has taken from other sources:

I don't take a vow to be responsible. I'm under the illusion that all of my inventions are quite true. For instance, in *Ragtime*, I'm satisfied that everything I made up about Morgan and Ford is true, whether it happened or not. Perhaps truer because it didn't happen. And I don't make any distinction anymore—and can't even remember—what of the events and circumstances in *Ragtime* are historically verifiable and what are not.<sup>50</sup>

Liz Maynes-Aminzade argues that since the reader cannot be sure which parts of the accounts of the celebrity characters Doctorow employs that are in fact true to the historical persons' lives, we keep these characters at arm's length.<sup>51</sup> By creating sympathy and yet distance to the historical characters, Doctorow attempts to avoid the trap of historiographic narrative that Emma Goldman voices through a letter to Evelyn Nesbit in the novel: "I am often asked the question How can the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is By being persuaded to identify with them."<sup>52</sup> Through his use of irony and humor, Doctorow creates seemingly ordinary historical characters that do not threaten to limit the historiographic narrative to a story told by a few about a few. Many critics have identified the purpose of *Ragtime* as an attempt on Doctorow's part at re-writing history. By challenging the notion that historiography is something fixed, something objective, Doctorow creates celebrity characters whose thoughts and feelings the narrator seems to have unlimited access to, which necessarily has to involve invention on his part, and he puts these characters in "historically absurd" situations. Freud and Jung's boat trip through the tunnel of love at Coney Island, for instance, is one of the novel's most humorous situations (*Ragtime*, 36). John G. Parks calls *Ragtime* a "comedy of history," and labels this kind of historical narration "a virtual carnival" as he says: "a carnival is a popular occasion when all hierarchies are overturned, oppositions blurred, when the "jolly relativity" of all things reigns."<sup>53</sup> The subjective kind of history that is presented in *Ragtime* may well be the ultimate unmasking

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<sup>50</sup> Levine, Paul. "The Writer as Independent Witness" in *Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner, New Jersey: Ontario Review Inc., 1983:69

<sup>51</sup> Maynes-Aminzade, 2006:12

<sup>52</sup> Doctorow, E.L. *Ragtime*, London: Picador, 1985:69

<sup>53</sup> Parks, 1991:56

and parody of the traditional discipline of historiography as an objective representation of the past.

Despite Doctorow's criticism of historiography's claim to objectivity, rather than being omitted in the novel, historical portrayals are mixed with fictional elements. The use of "Ragtime" as the novel's title suggests a strong presence of the musical genre, yet it is only once represented directly in the text, as Coalhouse Walker performs Scott Joplin's "Wall Street Rag" and "Maple Leaf Rag" for the Anglo-American family in New Rochelle (*Ragtime*, 121). Still, the novel's style reflects a textual representation of this musical genre, as historiography and fiction may be compared to the collision of the thumping chords and syncopating melody in ragtime music. *Ragtime* involves a constant negotiation between the static nature of historiography and the inventive and dynamic introduction of fiction.<sup>54</sup> An example of this negotiation is seen in Coalhouse Walker Jr.'s breaking into J.P. Morgan's library:

Symbolically, as Coalhouse violates Morgan's sanctuary, the frame of history is broken up. If the silhouettes were made of a white interior on a black background, now the black outside--represented by Coalhouse--has flooded the sacred white interior, giving way to innumerable possibilities. He has finally set history in motion.<sup>55</sup>

As Maynes-Aminzade argues, it is the fictional characters of *Ragtime* who actually represent the movers of history.<sup>56</sup>

Through his characters, Doctorow presents two different approaches to history in the novel. J. P. Morgan holds a view, as expressed in his belief in reincarnation, where history is repetitive. In trying to persuade Ford of the two men's superhuman abilities, he says:

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<sup>54</sup> Sánchez, Jesus Benito. "Doctorow's *Ragtime*: A Breach in the Frame of History". *Atlantis XIX* (2) (1997):21 <http://www.atlantisjournal.org/Papers/v19%20n2/v19%20n2-2.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> Sánchez, 1997:23

<sup>56</sup> Maynes-Aminzade, 2006:11

Suppose I could prove to you that there are universal patterns of order and repetition that give meaning to the activity of this planet. Suppose I could demonstrate that you yourself are an instrumentation in our modern age of trends in human identity that affirm the oldest wisdom in the world. (*Ragtime*, 112)

Ford responds with a view of history that resembles Morgan's, however, while Morgan has engaged a whole party of scholars and travels around the world in his search for truth, Ford had bought a little children's book on reincarnation, when he had a personal crisis, which gave him all the answers he was looking for. (*Ragtime*, 115-116) John G. Parks sees this approach to history as "historical narcissism" where history is viewed "almost wholly in terms of the self, an immature and infantile philosophy of history, one that is static and degenerate."<sup>57</sup> The completely opposite view of history is held by the Little Boy who regards history as dynamic and unpredictable. This view is clearly expressed in the novel when the Little Boy is skating with his family at a pond in New Rochelle: "But the boy's eyes saw only the tracks made by the skaters, traces quickly erased of moments past, journeys taken." (*Ragtime*, 92)

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<sup>57</sup> Parks, 1991:70

## Escapism—the Significance of Harry Houdini

As an example of the presence of celebrity characters in *Ragtime*, I will take a closer look at Doctorow's use of Harry Houdini in the novel. Houdini is the historical character who is most present, and he is an important character, not only to the story and style of the text, but most of all to the themes of the novel.

The reader's first encounter with Houdini is through the description of the Little Boy's interest in his career. It is quite a lengthy summary of Houdini's achievements:

Houdini was a headliner in the top vaudeville circuits. His audiences were poor people--carriers, peddlers, policemen, children. His life was absurd. He went all over the world accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping. He was roped to a chair. He escaped. He was chained to a ladder. He escaped. He was handcuffed, his legs were put in irons, he was tied up in a strait jacket and put in a locked cabinet. He escaped. He escaped from bank vaults, nailed-up barrels, sewn mailbags; he escaped from a zinc-lined Knabe piano case, a giant football, a galvanized iron boiler, a rolltop desk, a sausage skin. His escapes were mystifying because he never damaged or appeared to unlock what he escaped from. The screen was pulled away and there he stood disheveled but triumphant beside the violate container that was supposed to have contained him. He waved to the crowd (*Ragtime*, 14).

Then follows a further list of Houdini's achievements, before the paragraph closes with a description of his failed attempt to be buried alive, which almost cost him his life. Harter and Thompson argue that the "encyclopedic design" of *Ragtime* is typical of historical satire.<sup>58</sup> Through short, to-the-point sentences and a brief summary of some of Houdini's achievements, Doctorow creates what may seem a "truthful" and detached presentation of him, similar in style to a typical encyclopedic text. Yet by introducing comments of judgment ("his life was absurd") and repetition ("he escaped"), Doctorow mixes the typical objective style with the inescapability of subjectivity, which creates a satirical effect. While one may read a paragraph from an encyclopedia about any of the historical characters that are introduced and say that that is a historically truthful description, one might also read the portrayals in *Ragtime* as equally "correct", if one's philosophical standpoint is the same as Doctorow's, namely that "all is narrative."<sup>59</sup> As a good example of non-fictional narrative's claim to truth, encyclopedia.com announces that the page contains "verified facts,

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<sup>58</sup> Harter and Thompson., 1990:55

<sup>59</sup> Doctorow, 1983:26

information, and biographies from trusted sources.”<sup>60</sup> Entering a search for Harry Houdini, I found a short paragraph from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*’s sixth edition from 2008:

Harry Houdini, 1874-1926, American magician and writer, b. Budapest, Hungary. His real name was Erich Weiss; he took his stage name after the French magician Houdin. He was famed for his escapes from bonds of every sort—locks, handcuffs, straitjackets, and sealed chests underwater. While his stage magic skills were limited, Houdini was famously the originator (1918) of the celebrated Vanishing Elephant illusion. He performed in silent films and was also noted for his exposure of fraudulent spiritualist mediums and their phenomena (see spiritism ). He left to the Library of Congress his library of magic, one of the most complete and valuable in the world. Among his writings are *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* (1908), *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods* (1920), and *A Magician among the Spirits* (1924).<sup>61</sup>

This short and detached description of Houdini’s life claims the authority of being an objective and “historically correct” presentation, yet it has, like all other narratives, gone through a process of interpretation of sources and a selection of material to be put into the article, and one might well regard the abstract from *Ragtime* as equally “true”. While the encyclopedic text describes Houdini’s stage magic skills as limited, and only focuses on his invention of the Vanishing Elephant illusion, the Little Boy’s fascination with his work, although lacking a clear subjective voice, is far more laden with admiration through his long list of Houdini’s acts and his continuous repetition of “he escaped”. The probable reason why the Elephant trick is not mentioned in this list is because Houdini first introduced that act in 1918, and it had thus not taken place yet.<sup>62</sup> Still, Houdini’s failure to escape from the grave is described more thoroughly than his other acts, and with a more graphic language, which conveys a feeling that the Little Boy had been present and witnessed the near-accident himself, although it is stated early on that “he had not been taken to a performance” (*Ragtime*, 14). The effect is an impression of a young boy mixing “facts” that he has read in newspapers with his own imaginative renderings.

The appearance of Houdini in the novel is a good example of Doctorow’s challenge to the “great men” style of historiography. For instance, the Little Boy’s personal encounter

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.encyclopedia.com> (09.09.2009)

<sup>61</sup> [http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Harry\\_Houdini.aspx](http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Harry_Houdini.aspx) (09.09.2009)

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.thegreatharryhoudini.com/vanishingelephant.html> (09.09.2009)

with the great Harry Houdini leaves the reader with a less than glorious impression of the magician:

He surprised them with his modest, almost colorless demeanor. He seemed depressed. His success had brought into vaudeville a host of competitors. Consequently he had to think of more and more dangerous escapes. He was a short, powerfully built man, an athlete obviously, with strong hands and with back and arm muscles that suggested themselves through the cut of his rumpled tweed suit which, though well tailored, was worn this day inappropriately. The thermometer read in the high eighties. Houdini had unruly stiff hair parted in the middle and clear blue eyes, which did not stop moving. He was very respectful to Mother and Father and spoke of his profession with diffidence (*Ragtime*, 15-16).

Although widely popular, Houdini appears to be an insecure person who is largely dissatisfied with his work. Rather than elevating Houdini's greatness, the paragraph renders an image of him as a sad and insecure person, which generates feelings of pity rather than admiration in the reader. Throughout the novel, Houdini grows more and more depressed and seems to feel alienated by the society in which he lives. He feels oppressed by the wealthy: "The wealthy knew what was important. They looked at him as a child or a fool." (*Ragtime*, 31) The wealthy and powerful have traditionally determined the selection made by historians when choosing which stories to give voice to, and minority groups have long been ignored as they have been deemed unimportant. Houdini represents a break with the "old values" and stands for the introduction of mass entertainment as a valuable form of culture. Yet Houdini's distress and constant disparagement of his work shows the difficulty of being an agent of this transition:

Despite such experiences Houdini never developed what we think of as a political consciousness. He could not reason from his own hurt feelings. To the end he would be totally unaware of the design of his career, the great map of revolution laid out by his life. He was a Jew. (*Ragtime*, 34)

The revolution mentioned here does not only refer to the growing influence of popular culture, but also to the growing influence and increasing status of minority groups in the American society throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that Houdini, whose ethnic background was Jewish, gained such status as an artist is symbolic of the change that was taking place in the Ragtime Era. Yet Brian Roberts claims that Doctorow's focus on Houdini most of all reveals the limits of society in the early 1900s through the magician's

employment of traditional strategies in his performances, similar to the racist blackface minstrel shows, in order to gratify his white audience. Roberts argues that Houdini's act at the Times Tower, where he hangs upside down wearing a strait-jacket, replicates a lynching which resembles the killing of Coalhouse Walker Jr. earlier in the same chapter.<sup>63</sup> While Houdini appears to struggle in order to remove the strait-jacket, the reality is that he is able to release himself in less than a minute (*Ragtime*, 233). My interpretation of this is quite contrary to Roberts' view, namely that instead of representing minority groups as helpless victims, Houdini is a metaphor for their growing ability to free themselves from white oppression, which may be referring to the change that had taken place in America from the start of the century to the narrator's present.

By employing a narrator who tells us about the fairly remote past, Doctorow is able to explore the change that had taken place in America from the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s. The almost nostalgic, yet at the same time depressing portrayal of Houdini's love for his mother, explores how the increasing influence of Freud's psychoanalytic theory changed the notion of "normality" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through Houdini's mother-love Doctorow is also able to portray the unreliability of representation in the magician's desperate attempts to bring her back to life by organizing photographs of her in his apartment:

In his brownstone on 113<sup>th</sup> Street near Riverside Drive, Houdini arranged framed photographs of his mother to suggest her continuing presence. One close-up he laid on the pillow of her bed. He placed an enlarged photo of her seated in a chair and smiling in the very chair in which she had posed. (*Ragtime*, 149)

The concept of *simulacra*, "an effigy, image or representation"<sup>64</sup>, which is central to postmodern theory, involves an attempt at representation which can never be successful, as the referent is "based on the absence of what they seek to represent."<sup>65</sup> Houdini's attempt at

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<sup>63</sup> Roberts, Brian. "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jewish Identity: Fleshing out *Ragtime* as the Central Metaphor in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*". *Critique: studies in contemporary fiction* vol. 45 Iss. 3 (2004):4, [http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R01718956&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref\\_ft](http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R01718956&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft)

<sup>64</sup> *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Gramercy Books, 1996:1329

<sup>65</sup> Sanchez, 1997:19



resurrecting his dead mother is an example of how photographs work as simulacra in our society. Tateh's creation of silhouettes and eventually movies are other examples in the novel of attempts at recreating "real life". A text in itself may be regarded as a representation of reality, and in this sense *Ragtime* is a simulacrum. Jean Baudillard argues in "Simulacra and Simulations" that signs have replaced reality in our society as we rely on simulacra to the extent that we have lost contact with the real that it initially was meant to represent:<sup>66</sup>

This would be the successive phases of the image:

- (1) It is the reflection of a basic reality.
- (2) It masks and perverts a basic reality.
- (3) It masks the *absence* of a basic reality.
- (4) It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.<sup>67</sup>

Language itself was constructed in order to provide a representation of the world, and every word was meant to refer to something real. Consequently, language, and therefore, texts are inherently simulacra. However, if there is no equivalence between the reference and the real, as in Baudillard's fourth phase, any text has to be read with the realization that that is what it is: namely a text, and since it bears no relation to reality, a literary work reveals true nothing about the world in which we live. This extreme position is not shared by Doctorow, and the purpose of his use of simulacra in *Ragtime* is rather to question the commonly accepted equivalence between what is regarded as objective and realistic representations of the real and the real itself. In using simulacra, he establishes that representations are unstable, and questions the assumption that there is one true representation of reality. Instead, he opens up for the possibility of millions of subjective representations of the real.

In a similar manner to Doctorow's critique of historiography's claim for objective truth, Houdini is determined to reveal the fraud of people claiming to be clairvoyant. However, Houdini's own fraud is revealed when he attempts to escape from a cell in the Tombs where Harry K. Thaw is imprisoned. Unaware that Thaw is watching him; Houdini withdraws a piece of wire from his hair and uses it to unlock the cell door. As he is about to

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<sup>66</sup> Baudillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulations" in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000:404-405

<sup>67</sup> Baudillard, 2000:405

escape, he sees Thaw in the cell opposite making an obscene gesture as if to state that the magician has been caught. Later in the novel when Thaw escapes from prison, he will not reveal who helped him escape, but merely states that the reporters should call him Houdini. There is a paradox in Houdini's character as he himself relies on masking the truth in order to have people believe in his act, at the same time that he is determined to reveal the fraud of others. One might compare it to the manner in which Doctorow wants to reveal the hypocrisy of historiographic "truths", yet relies on the same strategies of narrative himself. Yet, the difference is, as Doctorow states in his essay "False Documents", that the writer of fiction admits that he lies and is therefore more honest than any writer of historiography who claims to tell the truth.<sup>68</sup>

In *Ragtime* Houdini's character is never able to see the value of his own career. Instead of regarding his act as something particular and valuable in itself, he constantly strives to create something "real". During the construction of the subway-tunnel from Brooklyn to Manhattan under the East River, there is a blowout and four workmen are sucked out of the tunnel and shot up through the river. Only one of them survived. Houdini goes to visit the sandhog at the hospital to ask him how he managed to escape, but is thrown out by the workman's family. (*Ragtime*, 77-78) Frustrated and humiliated, Houdini ponders his own short-comings:

There was a kind of act that used the real world for a stage. He couldn't touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theatre and forgot him? The headlines on the newsstand said Peary had reached the Pole. The real-world act was what got into the history books. (*Ragtime*, 79)

For Houdini the history books serve as communicators of truth. Houdini's frustration seems the same as Doctorow's, namely that since there is a consensus in our society that science and realism is the ultimate discourse, genres such as literature and acts of entertainment are often deemed unimportant. Still, Houdini is unable to see that the hegemony of realism is a cultural construction, and instead of fighting for the value of his profession, he merely accepts the ideology that is prominent in the *Ragtime* society.

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<sup>68</sup> Doctorow, 1983:27

Houdini functions as a metaphor for one of the main strategies employed by Doctorow in *Ragtime*. Being an escape artist, he constantly balances the factual and fictional in order to create an act which is possibly true, much like strategy that is employed in the “false documents” of Defoe or Cervantes. Similar to Houdini’s escape from all bonds, Doctorow attempts to escape from the dominance of already written historiography by using parts of this historiography and re-writing it. The chains that Houdini wears may well be a metaphor for the constraints that have been imposed on literature by the prevailing mode of realism. In stating that “all is narrative”, Doctorow releases himself from the limits of genre and is free to explore historiography as well as fiction without constraints.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Little Boy as Historiographic Narrator

One of the peculiar traits of *Ragtime* as a historical novel is its narrative voice. It is a distant and seemingly objective narration at the same time as it occasionally appears judgmental and subjective. The personality of the narrator is well concealed, and some critics of *Ragtime* suggest that the novel can only be said to have a multitude of different narrators. While some critics argue that it is impossible to consider the Little Boy as the sole narrator of *Ragtime* because the sources that are applied are extremely varied and the narrative seems more like a social energy than a single personality, I find that the narration necessarily must stem from his retrospective look at the past for several reasons:

For over two hundred pages Doctorow employs a third person omniscient narration which is difficult to locate, yet in the second to last paragraph of the novel the narrative voice turns to a first person point of view:

Poor, Father, I see his final exploration. He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb. His toe scuffs a soft storm of sand. He kneels and his arms spread in pantomimic celebration, the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self. (*Ragtime*, 235)

This sudden shift in narrative location creates the effect of a last-minute revelation that there was indeed a single person telling the story the whole time, although he was well hidden behind the “objective facts” he presents and the fast tempo of his narrative. Similarly, historiographic accounts do not generally present the narrative consciousness behind the “facts” that are presented. Once the “I” appears at the end of *Ragtime*, the reader has to re-examine the novel with a new idea of its narration, namely that it is a subjective composition.<sup>69</sup> John G. Parks argues: “That “I” unites the beginning and the end of the novel and merges fiction with history and social responsibility.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Parks, 1991:60

<sup>70</sup> Parks, 1991:60

Doctorow provides the reader with a warning at the very beginning of the novel as he quotes Scott Joplin:

Do not play this piece fast.

It is never right to play Ragtime fast... (*Ragtime*)

As the narrator bombards the reader with images and information, reading the novel in a fast tempo makes it almost impossible to detect the small hints and themes that lie under the surface of the Ragtime society which is portrayed. Yet it is difficult not to read the novel fast. In an interview with John F. Baker in 1975 Doctorow says: "I wanted a really relentless narrative, full of ongoing energy. I wanted to recover that really marvelous tool for a novelist, the sense of motion."<sup>71</sup> *Ragtime* is full of abrupt shifts of focus, and moves quickly between different settings and characters. The rhythm of the narrative has been identified as a verbal equivalent of ragtime music by several critics. Some have also noted its style as resembling that of a motion picture, which the Little Boy's character shows a great fascination with in the novel.

Furthermore, the Little Boy as character's artistic qualities and attention to detail resembles a historiographer at work. Harter and Thompson identify him as one of four artist figures in the novel.<sup>72</sup> He is "alert not only to discarded materials but to unexpected events and coincidences" and "lives an entirely secret intellectual life" (*Ragtime*, 89-90). The stories of change and transformation from Ovid that are told by his grandfather, make him aware of the "instability of both things and people" (*Ragtime*, 91). This awareness makes the Little Boy the ultimate postmodern consciousness, as he expresses the relativity of all things: "It was evident to him that the world composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction." (*Ragtime*, 92) When realizing that the Little Boy is in fact the narrator, it is interesting to look at the manner in which he portrays his own character in the novel. The awareness that his character posits is exclusive in comparison with the other characters who seem quite unable to reflect upon their own existence. John G. Parks finds

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<sup>71</sup> Baker, John F. "PW Interviews: E. L. Doctorow" in *Conversations with E. L. Doctorow*, ed. Christopher D. Morris, Jackson :University Press of Mississippi, 1999:2

<sup>72</sup> Harter and Thompson, 1990:65

that the truth-value of *Ragtime* relies on the believability of the Little Boy as narrator.<sup>73</sup> He needs to establish the quality of his own perceptiveness in order to appear as a qualified producer of historiography.

The Little Boy would have access to a wide selection of sources about events that appear in the book: the narrator cites the letters that Father sends from Greenland and his Arctic journals, Younger Brother's diaries and the silhouettes that he discards, newspaper articles, as well as Coalhouse Walker's letters to officials.<sup>74</sup> Another source of information in the novel is Houdini's unpublished papers. It seems unlikely that the Little Boy would somehow have gotten access to them, since they remain unpublished, which might lead the reader to question the reliability of the narrator as historiographer. The narrator also portrays the thoughts and feelings of the characters, like Houdini's astonishment when he reads of Franz Ferdinand's death in the newspaper or Freud's extreme frustration with everything that he encounters in America. It is therefore evident that the narration of *Ragtime* involves a great deal of invention and creativity in the portrayals of historical events that appear in the book. Although the novel mimics and parodies traditional historiographic narratives, Doctorow's intention is not to create a historiographic document which claims to be objective and truthful, quite the contrary; he establishes the importance of subjectivity since to strive for objectivity is an impossible quest. Literature is extremely valuable as an exploration of the possibilities of the imagination and is a source of historical knowledge since it may be regarded as both "a product and producer of cultural energies."<sup>75</sup>

Another hint in the novel that supports the identification of the Little Boy as narrator appears when he meets his great idol Houdini at the very beginning of the novel, and requests that he should "warn the Duke", referring to Houdini's encounter with Archduke Franz Ferdinand in France. Although Houdini makes nothing of this statement at the time when it is uttered, it comes to mind at one point during one of his performances:

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<sup>73</sup> Parks, 1991:61

<sup>74</sup> Harter and Thompson, 1990:65

<sup>75</sup> Abrams, 1999:183

He was upside down over Broadway, the year was 1914, and the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was reported to have been assassinated. It was at this moment that an image composed itself in Houdini's mind. The image was of a small boy looking at himself in the shiny brass headlamp of an automobile. (*Ragtime*, 233)

The narrator claims that this mystifying experience is recorded in the magician's private, unpublished papers. Thus, the Little Boy can only be a clairvoyant child or, more likely, an older narrator who tells the story of his childhood. Although *Ragtime* is set in the years 1902 to 1917, the narrative voice is located in the mid-1970s. The narrative present is only revealed once in the novel and may easily be overlooked. Early on, in a description of Houdini's career, it is stated: "Today, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escapes is even larger." (*Ragtime*, 15) Houdini died on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1926.

Doctorow creates a narrative style which he himself has called "mock historical-pedantic," a narrative distance that is located "somewhere between the intimacy of fiction and the remoteness of history."<sup>76</sup> The blending of fiction and fact in *Ragtime* forces the reader to confront the injustice of the past, and the present. Liz Maynes-Aminzade argues that the novel's narrative at times resembles the traditional American History textbook narrator:<sup>77</sup> "*Ragtime*'s narrator mimics the voice that tries to suppress its own person-ness in order to emphasize that we are reading 'just the facts,' while, in fact, giving us a limited, slanted, and whitewashed account of history."<sup>78</sup> The first image which is presented in *Ragtime* is a typical sentimental portrayal of America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as has often been presented in schoolbooks:

Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's. Teddy Roosevelt was President. The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. (*Ragtime*, 11)

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<sup>76</sup> Levine, Paul. *E. L. Doctorow*. London and New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985:18

<sup>77</sup> Maynes-Aminzade, 2006:8

<sup>78</sup> Maynes-Aminzade, 2006:8

This seductive and nostalgic portrait of a “simpler time” is soon to be contrasted with a harsher social reality a few pages later:

Millions of men were out of work. Those fortunate enough to have jobs were dared to form unions. Courts enjoined them, police busted their heads, their leaders were jailed and new men took their jobs. A union was an affront to God. The laboring man would be protected and cared for not by the labor agitators, said one wealthy man, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom had given the control of the property interests of this country. If all else failed the troops were called out...On the tobacco farms Negroes stripped tobacco leaves thirteen hours a day and earned six cents an hour, man, woman or child. Children suffered no discriminatory treatment. They were valued everywhere they were employed. They did not complain as adults tended to do... One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were buried alive. One hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things. (*Ragtime*, 37)

The terse, flat prose which is commonly associated with the nostalgic catalogues that often accompany our conception of the Ragtime era is in the latter paragraph employed in order to provide evidence against these myths.<sup>79</sup> The detached manner in which these contrasting social conditions are presented creates a bitterly ironic image of the way that American history has been communicated through historiographic presentations:

In short, these delightful artistic fusions (or syncopations, given the guiding metaphor of the novel's title) show history to be susceptible to the same rage for order as art, as well as to the same processes of selection, amendment, and manipulation; contrary to their aspirations to objective truth, both are fundamentally subjective, creative mediators between self and society, neither of which is entirely dispensable nor entirely sufficient to guarantee that relationship.<sup>80</sup>

What typically characterizes postmodern literature is its parodic relation to the past: “To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it.”<sup>81</sup> As Linda Hutcheon argues, the metafictional novel cannot reject the heritage of a textual past, yet it “asserts its rebellion through the ironic *abuse* of it.”<sup>82</sup> Doctorow “abuses” the traditional historiographic text in order to confront not only historiography's dominion

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<sup>79</sup> Saltzman, 1983:91

<sup>80</sup> Saltzman, 1983:96

<sup>81</sup> Hutcheon, 1989:6

<sup>82</sup> Hutcheon, 1989:12



over literature but also the truthfulness of the historiographic accounts that have been presented. Stephen Harris poses a question in his comparison of Doctorow's and Vidal's fiction; is the reader able to relate to any moral or political content in *Ragtime*, or do we become neutral spectators, "comfortable in the 'omniscience' we are tempted to share with the detached narrator?"<sup>83</sup> In my opinion, Doctorow's intense ironical tone, although detached, may create a profound sense of concern in reader, both regarding the injustice of the society that is portrayed, and also about the process of creating historiography.

Contrary to Houdini "who never developed a political consciousness", the Little Boy is not only able to identify the subjectivity of all narrative, but also to exploit the possibilities that this subjectivity provides: "He has mingled his memories with popular clichés, historical reconstructions, and invention in a narrative that simultaneously represents the era and falsifies it."<sup>84</sup> I disagree with Harpham's statement that the Little Boy's account of the Ragtime Era is a falsification of this period, as no narrative can fully represent reality. Instead, I find that Doctorow allows the Little Boy to present his own subjective account of his childhood, which to him is a "true" portrayal of the past, or perhaps even more accurately, a "true" portrayal of his current conception of his past.

The narrator presents his conception of the world as a young boy, mixed with 50 years of knowledge about events to come. Berndt Ostendorf argues in his article "The Musical World of Doctorow's *Ragtime*", that the narrator "deliberately merges past significance and present meaning" as he portrays an era 70 years earlier:

The "historical" novel *Ragtime*, then, is a form of biographical-anthropological fiction that apprehends and portrays, from the historical moment of the 1970s, the world of human desire and action of the turn of the century—history in the mode of participant observation over an interval of seventy years.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Harris, 2002:189

<sup>84</sup> Harpham, 1985:90

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/462202.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> Ostendorf, Berndt. "The Musical World of Doctorow's *Ragtime*", *American Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991:581

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2713082>

The narrative at times resembles the naïve and imaginative story-telling of a child who relates to the truth in a different manner than an adult would. Through the eyes of an adult it would be questionable if Houdini actually did crash in front of the Little Boy's house in New Rochelle, but a child would accept this as fact without a doubt. The use of a child narrator underlines the idea that the conception that something is true is often not the same for children and adults, and "truth" is ultimately unstable and relative to the recipient's conception of the world. Children's appreciation for stories and acceptance of their value is regarded as ideal in Doctorow's opinion. In "False Documents" he writes: "In our society there is no presumption of truth in the act of storytelling except in the minds of children."<sup>86</sup> In addition to its critical voice, *Ragtime* is also a celebration of the power of imagination and the freedom of thought which fiction enjoys.

Doctorow states in his essay "False Documents", that historiography is composed, and that it has to be rewritten from one generation to another.<sup>87</sup> *Ragtime* serves as Doctorow's own contribution to this collective kind of history-writing. John G. Parks argues that "the novel is not about the ragtime era, but about how people view that era, how one might compose and recompose it".<sup>88</sup> The novel exhibits a view of the early 1900s which is derived from "what we know about the past through the discourses of that past."<sup>89</sup> It contains a great number of intertexts from popular culture such as newspapers, movies, literature and music. At the very end of the novel, for instance, Tateh, who has transformed into Baron Ashkenazy, has an idea for a movie which greatly resembles Hal Roach's series of movies called "Our Gang:"

He suddenly had an idea for a film. A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who have funny adventures in their own neighborhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again. (*Ragtime*, 236)

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<sup>86</sup> Doctorow, 1983:18

<sup>87</sup> Doctorow, 1983:24

<sup>88</sup> Parks, 1991:60

<sup>89</sup> Hutcheon, 1989:21

The positive tone of the novel's ending, where the children of different ethnic identities play happily together, appears to be in sharp contrast with the tension and struggle of minority groups in the American society as it is generally portrayed in *Ragtime*. It seems ironical, and may, in the light of New Historicist theory, be interpreted as a criticism of representations that tend to smooth over the unresolved conflicts in society in order to obtain a satisfying resolution.<sup>90</sup> It is tempting to claim that Hollywood filmmakers have seemed particularly inclined to provide the audience with these kinds of happy-endings.

Can narrating the past ever be unmarked by the state of the present? Philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce says: "However remote in time events may seem to be, every historical judgment refers to present needs and situations."<sup>91</sup> Historiographers are omnipotent in the sense that they narrate the past and know the course of history to the point of their present time. Their perception of a situation will be affected by later occurrences and the values of their culture in the present. It seems, for instance, impossible for a historiographer today to produce a work about the early seeds of Nazism which is totally unaffected by the knowledge that the ideology would produce hatred and violence, which ultimately led to the death of approximately six million Jews in Europe during World War II.

Coalhouse Walker's rebellion has been characterized as too early for his time by many literary scholars. Walker's group of followers resembles the militant black panthers of the 60s and 70s. As noted in Chapter 2, Coalhouse Walker's fight for justice which is based on Von Kleist's novel "Michael Kohlhaas", also leads one to think that Doctorow might intend a comparison with Martin Luther King Jr's fight for civil rights. It is clear that the narrator of *Ragtime* has, in the process of creating a historiographic document, selected material which is valuable in the light of his present societal conditions. In this sense *Ragtime* resembles Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* as a strong criticism of present conditions through a portrayal of the injustice of the past. In telling the story from a distance, the narrator is able to relate to the events that took place in the ragtime years which proved to be significant in the years to come. This is similar to the manner in which the traditional discipline of historiography often has involved drawing up lines of development, and looking at historical events, not in isolation, but related to later occurrences. Coalhouse Walker's character may be regarded as

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<sup>90</sup> Abrams, 1999:184

<sup>91</sup> Doctorow, 1983:24

representing an early seed of the American civil rights fighters who paved the way for the work of Martin Luther King Jr. in the 50s and 60s, and the position of the first African American President of the United States, Barack Obama, in 2009.

## CHAPTER 4

### Subjective Historiography

In this thesis I started with an introduction which presented the debate in different literary traditions regarding the relationship between literature and historiography. Postmodernism was particularly focused on since I find that Doctorow's idea of the subjectivity of all narrative is inspired by this philosophical tradition. Postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon argues that the creation of postmodern literature generally involves a self-conscious and parodic view of the past, and invents the term "historiographic metafiction" in order to distinguish between postmodern historiographic accounts and traditional historical fiction. Doctorow's essay "False Document" was treated in a separate part of Chapter 1 since it provides the philosophical foundations for the satirical presentation of historiography in *Ragtime*. Doctorow establishes that "all is narrative" and fights for a renewed status for fiction writers in our society. He borrows the term "false documents" from Kenneth Rexroth, and labels his own novel a false document in an article in The New York Times at the year of the novel's publication. Criticism towards Doctorow's view of historiography as it is evident in *Ragtime* was presented at the end of the chapter.

In Chapter 2, the significance of the historical characters that play a part in the novel was discussed. The celebrity characters create confusion about the novel's nature as a work of fiction or non-fiction. They also provide Doctorow with the possibility of creating a parodic false document which resembles, yet differs, from traditional historiographic narratives. *Ragtime* is the author's contribution to a rewriting of historiography. As an example of the presence of historical figures in the novel, Harry Houdini's character was looked at more closely. Houdini is the celebrity character who is most present in the novel and through his constant strife to create something which is regarded as "real" or "true", he is an excellent example of the limits and narrow-mindedness that comes from the obsession with realism in our society.

Furthermore, in Chapter 3 I discussed why the Little Boy may be regarded as the narrator of *Ragtime* and how his narrative both resembles and diverges from traditional historiographic narratives. Similar to the manner in which historiographic accounts generally tend to present a text without revealing the narrative consciousness behind it, the location of the narrator in the novel is concealed, yet a few hints and revelations supports the

comprehension of the Little Boy as narrator. The mock historical-pedantic style of *Ragtime* creates a strong sense of criticism towards historiographic portrayals which claim to be truthful and objective. The Little Boy tells the story of his childhood from a distance, since it is revealed that the narrator's present is the mid-1970s. This is interesting since his comprehension of the Ragtime years is necessarily affected by his knowledge about the years to come, and may perhaps reveal as much about the state of society at the point in time of his narrative as it does about the early 1900s, in which the novel is set. In this last chapter I have briefly summed up some of the points which I have discussed in this thesis, and will go on to provide a conclusion to my discussions.

All historiographic accounts are necessarily subjective. It is of importance to distinguish between the objectivity of a historical event and the inescapable subjectivity that is involved in communicating it. This conclusion is based on the recognition that the creation of any text, fiction or non-fiction, involves a selection of material, a choice of words, and a point of view that departs from the cognitive processes of an individual or several individuals. In *Ragtime* Doctorow sheds light on different aspects of the subjectivity of all narrative. He criticizes the general notion that historiography is inherently objective and is an expression of truths as opposed to literature which is generally subjective and merely for fun. Through the historiographic style of the text, which involves the presence of historical characters, events and settings, and a distant or seemingly non-existing narrator, *Ragtime* reveals that there is always a consciousness behind the facts that are presented in historiography as well as in literature. Through the novel's parodic presentation of the strategies involved in creating historiography, Doctorow proves his point that "there is only narrative."<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, he does not dismiss historiography as a discipline, but he challenges its hegemony as a communicator of truths in our society. *Ragtime* is a political novel in the sense that it is a criticism of the manner in which our conception of the past is simply a product of the ideology of those in power. According to New Historicist literary criticism, a text is both "a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes", its content is therefore inevitably determined by the ideological conditions of the time when it is written.<sup>93</sup> A good

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<sup>92</sup> Doctorow, 1983:26

<sup>93</sup> Abrams, 1999:183

example of what may be characterized as the “narrow-mindedness” of our society, is the portrayal of writer Theodore Dreiser in *Ragtime*, trying to place his chair perfectly in order to write his novel from the “correct” angle. He keeps on changing position through the whole night in search of the proper alignment. (*Ragtime*, 28) The very idea that there is a proper alignment limits our comprehension of the past since there are as many different experiences of reality as there are people in the world.

Although Doctorow establishes that historiography and literature are similar as they both rely on narrative techniques, he still argues that the fiction writer should be awarded a special position in our society. In this aspect he seems to rely more on New Historicist theory than postmodernism, as postmodernists tend to deny the existence of categories all together, while New Historicists regard the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction a creation of “Post-Renaissance ideological formations”, yet useful when conducting literary analysis.<sup>94</sup> The recognition that all texts are merely representations of reality is more common to fiction writers than writers of historiography or other genres who rely on realism as a sensibility. In Doctorow’s opinion, this gives the writer of fiction an insight which is extremely valuable as it is only when the impossibility of realism is uncovered, that one can value the amount of information about historical and cultural conditions that fiction and all kinds of representations actually embody:

Any text, on the other hand, is conceived as a discourse which, although it may seem to present, or reflect, an external reality, in fact consist of what are called **representations**—that is, verbal formations which are the “ideological products” or “cultural constructs” of the historical conditions specific to an era. (...) these cultural and ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm, and propagate the power-structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society.<sup>95</sup>

Given this philosophical standpoint, Doctorow’s peculiar historiographic account of the *Ragtime* years carries the “ideological products” of the early 1970s, when the novel was written, as well as it shapes the culture in which it is situated. The author and the readers of *Ragtime* are also perceived as “subjects”, whose creation and reaction to the novel is

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<sup>94</sup> Abrams, 1999:184-185

<sup>95</sup> Abrams, 1999:183-184

determined by the conditions of their own time.<sup>96</sup> I most likely relate to *Ragtime* differently in 2010 than a reader of the novel would in the 1970s. It is therefore impossible to argue that there can be an objective interpretation of the text as it is relative to the conditions of the reader, according to New Historicist theory. It might seem that this critical tradition leaves little to the creative effort of an individual in reading or writing a text. Yet, while a text may be seen to reflect the dominant ideology of a specific time, it may also resist and mould it.<sup>97</sup> This is Doctorow's project, namely to change the common ideological conception of historiography as purveyor of truths in our society. Literature interacts with culture and is at the same time a product and a producer of cultural energies.<sup>98</sup>

Doctorow has said that *Ragtime* is a false document as it tries to fool the reader into accepting it as a true account. However, this strategy is not followed through wholeheartedly, but is rather used as a means to establish that literature which is written in the form of a false document is not very different from an account which is labeled non-fiction. Given the inescapable subjectivity of all narrative, I will conclude that all texts which claim the authority of objectivity are false documents. While it may be a conscious strategy for writers of fiction, writers of non-fiction are usually unaware that through their claim for objectivity, they create documents which are in a sense more false than texts which are labeled fiction. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction is a human construct which makes little sense if one regards it impossible to render an image of the past which is objective. One can only grasp the true nature of all narratives if one is able to look past the commonly accepted claim for truth which is attributed to the discipline of historiography, and realize that it is only a representation of reality and therefore that realism as a sensibility is impossible.

Where does this leave the communication of our historical pasts? To learn about one's historical ancestry is important for people of all cultures since it provides a sense of identity and feeling of belonging to a community. To know about the past also makes it possible to learn from the experiences of people who have lived before us. While the society in which I live relies on the discipline of historiography to communicate the experiences of our

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<sup>96</sup> Abrams, 1999:185-186

<sup>97</sup> Wood, Nigel. Introductory note to "The Circulation of Social Energy", in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000:495

<sup>98</sup> Abrams, 1999:183



ancestors, such knowledge was in earlier times, and still is in some cultures, communicated through the transmission of stories and myths from generation to generation. The stories were perceived as educational and as a means of giving counsel to the listeners. In “False Documents,” Doctorow reveals his desire for a society where the value of stories is restored and literature is given the same status which is awarded the discipline of historiography.

The writing of historiography should be a collective effort in Doctorow’s opinion. As he says: “Since history *can* be composed, you see, then you want to have as many people active in the composition as possible. A kind of democracy of perception...”<sup>99</sup> If history is communicated by as many people as possible, with the use of different communicative strategies, there is a lesser chance that a one-dimensional view of the past, controlled by those who are in power, is what remains in our collective memory. This strategy is comparable to the manner in which the police strive to collect as many witness statements as possible when investigating a criminal offence; in order to find out as accurately as possible what really happened. Imagine if the investigators would claim that they had solved the crime after hearing only one witness-statement instead of listening to the multiple explanations of people who had witnessed it from different angles or points of view. The actual events of the past may be considered to be objective, but the conception of the events in the minds of people who witness them are determined by their point of view and the complicated “cultural baggage” that affects their entire conception of the world. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 was undoubtedly conceived differently by a man who was inside one of the buildings at the time of the crash, and managed to escape before it collapsed, and a hijacker on one of the planes who saw the towers approach and flew straight towards them. The news of the attack was then communicated by the media which generally claim to be objective, yet the accounts of a patriotic American reporter would differ greatly from the manner in which the news were communicated through the Middle Eastern news network Al Jazeera. The conception of the attack in the minds of people watching different news channels or reading different newspapers would also differ according to their location in the world, their ideological ideas and generally their worldview. It is all subjective.

Today, one of the few examples of a collectively created “library” of texts is the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. Anybody can submit a text about any subject, and then again,

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<sup>99</sup> Friedl, Herwig, Dieter Schultz. “A Multiplicity of Witness: E. L. Doctorow at Heidelberg” in *Conversations with E. L. Doctorow*, ed. Christopher D. Morris, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999:112

anyone can add or revise texts that other people have written. There is a constant negotiation regarding the representations of, for instance, historical events. Consequently, Wikipedia contains the sum of multiple subjective conceptions. Although resembling a traditional encyclopedia in form, it is generally regarded an unreliable source in the minds of most scientists. The negotiations in Wikipedia resemble the work of the police investigators, as I have outlined above, yet, although collectively created, both only allow for one master text to represent the collective opinion.

While he is also preoccupied with collective efforts in establishing something “true”, it seems that Doctorow’s strategy is quite different from the ones mentioned above. In his opinion, subjective narratives should remain separate texts rather than being summed up in a general statement. It may be difficult to see how this would work in practical terms, for instance in the case of teaching history in schools, yet an alertness to the subjectivity of all narrative, would broaden our understanding of the processes involved in the creation of historical documents. It would allow for different narratives in different types of genres to have equal status as valuable conceptions of reality. There would be a subjective historiography. *Ragtime* is, along with his other novels, Doctorow’s contributions to a complex “historiographic library.”

*“Like reflections on a page  
The world’s what you create.”*

(John Petrucci, “Wither”, 2009)

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